

All About Sneak Attacks (Part One)

By Skip Williams

It seems that some DMs and players out there just can't agree on how the sneak attack ability really works. To be sure, a clever player can deal out a big pile of damage through sneak attacks. A 20th-level rogue fighting with two weapons could deal 40d6 points of damage or more in a single round of sneak attacks, which is enough to make most DMs cry "foul" the first time a PC tries it.

So, let's examine just when sneak attacks are possible, how many sneak attacks characters can make during 1 round, and how the rules for sneak attacks interact with other rules that govern combat.

The Basics of the Sneak Attack

For basic rules governing sneak attacks, look in the rogue class description in Chapter 3 of the *Player's Handbook*. Here's an overview.

Sneak attacks require one of two basic conditions:

- The target must be denied his Dexterity bonus to Armor Class (whether he actually has a Dexterity bonus or not) against the attack.

--or--

- The attacker must flank the target.

If the attacker cannot meet either of these two conditions, no sneak attack is possible. If the attacker can meet at least one of these conditions, a sneak attack is possible, provided that something else doesn't intrude and spoil the sneak attack. Several things can kill a sneak attack, even if the attacker sets up the attack properly:

- Ranged attacks can be sneak attacks only if the range is 30 feet or less.
- The attacker must use a weapon optimally to make a sneak attack. If the attacker takes the -4 penalty to deal nonlethal damage, no sneak attack is possible. (A weapon that normally deals nonlethal damage, such as a sap, can be used in a sneak attack; however, you deal nonlethal damage if you do so.)
- Sneak attacks are possible only against living creatures that have discernible anatomies. Undead, constructs, oozes, plants, and incorporeal creatures are not subject to sneak attacks, and creatures that are not subject to critical hits are not subject to sneak attacks also.
- Sneak attacks require a clear view of the target. Any degree of concealment -- even concealment from fog (a lousy 20% miss chance) foils sneak attacks.
- Sneak attacks are possible only when the attacker can reach the target's vital spots. If you're limited to beating the foe about the ankles, you can't make sneak attacks against him.

Beyond the Basics

So just when do those conditions and counter conditions apply? I'm glad you asked.

Defender Denied Dexterity Bonus

When the rules speak of a defender being denied a Dexterity bonus, they refer to any number of exceptional combat situations in which a creature cannot effectively defend itself by blocking or dodging physical assaults. Creatures that have no Dexterity bonus to Armor Class, or creatures that have penalties are not "denied" a Dexterity bonus in a normal combat situation.

Fortunately for characters who rely on sneak attacks (and unfortunately for everyone else), such combat situations abound. Here's a list:

Being Caught Flat Footed

This happens to almost everybody sooner or later. Anyone who is surprised is flat-footed during the ensuing surprise round. Surprised or not, anyone also is flat-footed during the first round of any combat from the time the combat begins until the creature takes its first turn in the initiative cycle.

Flat-footed creatures have two big disadvantages: They can't make attacks of opportunity and they can't use their Dexterity bonus (if any) to Armor Class. This makes them vulnerable to melee sneak attacks and to ranged sneak attacks (but see the section on uncanny dodge).

Coming in Part Two of All About Sneak Attacks

Skip goes over unseen opponents and immobilization.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and has been the Sage of ***Dragon** Magazine* since 1986. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (his borscht gets rave reviews).

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